

**‘More freedom’ or ‘more harmony’?
Henriette Roland Holst, Jacques Engels and the influence of class and gender on
socialists’ sexual attitudes**

*Paper submitted to the seminar on “Labour organizations and sexuality”,
Université de Bourgogne, Dijon
5 October 2001*

Peter Drucker¹

Sheila Rowbotham once wrote, ‘A radical critical history ... requires a continuing movement between conscious criticism and evidence, a living relationship between questions coming from a radical political movement and the discovery of aspects of the past which would have been ignored within the dominant framework.’² Her words may apply with particular force to the history of labour organizations and sexuality. Historians can find it easier to find criticisms and questions to raise about the past than to sustain the ‘continuing movement’ required to understand the past in its own terms. The temptation is great to compare positions on sexuality taken in labour organizations in the past with positions held by historians in the present. The result can be either an idealization of sex-radical forbears or a condemnation of those whose ideas fell short of twenty-first-century enlightenment — in either case a curiously old-fashioned sort of history, which benefits little from the advances made by social historians outside ‘the dominant framework’, particularly social historians of sexuality, since the 1970s.

Analyzing positions on sexuality taken in labour organizations in the past in the light of knowledge that has been accumulating about social and sexual patterns of their specific periods seems likely to be a more fruitful approach. Four different angles of attack seem particularly likely to be useful. First, we can bear in mind the gender, generational and class diversity of labour and left movements — particularly among leaders and writers, whose origins were not necessarily in the working class they were championing — and try to analyze the impact of this diversity on different standpoints that were taken. Second, we can bear in mind the impact of legal, economic and technological changes, such as changes in marriage, divorce and criminal legislation; the development of contraceptive technology; male and female labour participation rates and working conditions; housing conditions and residence patterns. Third, we can situate activists within the debates they were taking part in with contemporary interlocutors inside and outside the labour movement and left, being sensitive to the different currents they supported or opposed. Fourth, historians can compare labour activists’ pronouncements about sexuality with what is known about evolving (hetero- and homo-)sexualities, sexual subcultures and gender roles in their own time.

This kind of history obviously requires much more work than simply citing and critiquing people’s published works does. The most common sources for the social history of sexuality — police and medical records, diaries, letters — do not usually refer directly to the actors and writers in labour and left history. A reasonably complete picture of the specific social and sexual background of labour and left organizations would only be the result of years or even decades of research. In the meantime, however, we can at least try to keep abreast of developments in working class social history and the social history of sexuality more broadly, and try to draw on this background knowledge as we analyze particular pronouncements on sexual issues from within the labour movement.

¹ Thanks to Jan Willem Stutje and Arthur Bruls for their comments on an earlier version of this article, and to the organizers and participants in the Université de Bourgogne seminar for stimulating discussions.

² Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: Rediscovering Women in History from the 17th Century to the Present*, New York, Vintage Books, 1974, xviii.

As a modest case in point, this paper tries to apply this approach to two figures in the Dutch workers' movement of the mid-1920s who played prominent roles in discussions of sexuality.³ Henriette Roland Holst (1869-1952), one of the most admired Dutch poets of her day, a pioneering Marxist historian, and a prominent figure on the Dutch left for half a century, was an intellectual and ideological force to contend with on whatever issue she turned her attention to. Her 1925 book *Communism and Morality* included a chapter on 'Sexual morality and the proletariat'. Her associate Jacques Engels (1896-1982, often known under his pseudonym Jelle Boersma) published a book the following year, *The Communist and His Sexual Morality*, which can be seen as a development of, or perhaps in part a response to, Roland Holst's chapter.⁴

What makes the contrast between the two works so instructive is that the two authors were such close associates, and yet nonetheless in discussing several issues arrived at emphases so different that they were tantamount to significant (albeit not explicit) divergences. Both argued for 'more freedom and more harmony' in sexual relations, as Roland Holst put it in her introduction to Engels' book.⁵ But when freedom and harmony came into tension — as they often have in socialist discussions of sexuality — Engels tended in some respects to choose freedom (particularly for men) while Roland Holst tended to choose harmony. Together they constitute a virtual laboratory test case of how different social and personal backgrounds, of two people operating in the same political current in the same society at the same time, could produce divergent standpoints on sexual-political issues.

In terms of their formal political affiliations in the mid-1920s, Roland Holst and Engels can hardly be told apart. Both were members of the Communist Party of Holland when they met in 1923; both left it in 1924 and joined the dissident communist BKSP (League of Communist Struggle and Propaganda Clubs); both returned to the CPH in 1925 under Comintern pressure; and both would leave the CPH again, this time for good, in 1927.

Comparing the communist journals they wrote for with others — such as the social democratic *Socialistische Gids* or the anarchist *Vrije Socialist* — suggests by the way that their communist milieu, in the period before the Stalinization of Western European communism, was at least as open to sexual radicalism as other currents in the labour movement at the time. The criticisms made in recent years of the communist movement's sexual politics — in large part justified criticisms — should not make us ignore the evidence of the attraction that early communism had (at least temporarily) for sexual radicals. There are many examples from a number of countries, ranging from Stella Browne in England to Crystal and Max Eastman and Floyd Dell in the US to Wilhelm Reich in Germany. Communists benefitted from the fact that Soviet sexual legislation was widely viewed as enlightened in sex reform circles in the 1920s and that the Soviets played a prominent role in the World League for Sexual Reform.⁶ Dutch radicals in particular were influenced by Germany, where both sex reform movements and the left were stronger than in the

³ This paper is in some sense trying to apply to the 1920s the approach that Dennis Bos used in his paper for last year's seminar in Amsterdam on 'Free Love and the Labour Movement': 'The making of a new sexual morality in the early socialist labour movement in Amsterdam', n.p., 2000.

⁴ The extent of Roland Holst's influence on Engels' book is unclear. At one point she wrote him that 'the last chapters of your book ... pleased me very much' (Roland Holst to Engels, 16 Mar. 1925, in Archief J. Engels, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, section 2), but I have found no letters with any more specific comments. At one point she resisted writing an introduction to it, with the argument, 'I'm not of any use to you, I myself have almost no audience left in [?] bourgeois circles any more' (Roland Holst to Engels, 6 June 1925, in Archief J. Engels, section 2). Even if this was a polite way of putting some distance between herself and Engels' book, she did agree to write the introduction in the end, emphasizing both her friendship with the author and her sympathy for his work (Henriette Roland Holst, 'Inleiding', in Jelle Boersma (Jacques Engels), *Socialisme en sexuele moraal*, Den Haag: De Baanbreker, 1931, 9 — cited henceforth as 'Engels').

Note: The 1931 edition is a considerably abridged version of Jelle Boersma (Jacques Engels), *De communist en zijn sexuele moraal*, Overschie: Uitgeverij 'Iskra', 1926 — cited henceforth as Engels (1926). Since the 1931 edition had a bigger print run and is somewhat easier to find today, it is cited where possible.

⁵ Roland Holst, 'Inleiding', in Engels, 9.

⁶ John Lauitsen & David Thorstad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)*, Novato CA: Times Change Press, 1995 revised ed., is still worth reading on this subject, though it does not take enough account of more recent research. See also Peter Drucker, 'Gays and the left: scratching the surface', *Against the Current* no. 68 (May-June 1997).

Netherlands. Significantly, German gay rights activist Kurt Hiller, never a Communist himself, felt obliged to say in 1930 that the Communist Party was by far the gay movement's most reliable ally in the Reichstag.⁷

While there were doubtless pressures on sex radicals in the CP to tone down their sexual politics, those pressures were not necessarily greater in the mid-1920s than in other currents that were trying to reach a working class audience. The sexual conservatism of social democratic parties in this period is well documented. Richard Cleminson has also shown that at least one Spanish anarchist current held well into the 1930s to a sexual puritanism out of keeping with anarchists' later image.⁸ European Communist parties of the early and mid-1920s were certainly no more sexually conservative than their social democratic and anarchist rivals. To the extent that Roland Holst or Engels' views on sexuality were less than revolutionary, therefore, party discipline is unlikely to have been primarily responsible. Nor were they hindered by any dogmatic interpretation of Marxism. The two of them were distinguished in the CPH by their outspoken opposition to economic determinism or catering to working class prejudices. Roland Holst stressed the 'dialectical interaction between the human mind and social environment', and the importance of prefigurative forms of socialist ethics even in capitalist society, in many of her writings.⁹ Though Engels in particular had more than his share of conflicts with the CPH leadership, and in particular with its autocratic leader David Wijnkoop, the Comintern intervened specifically from Moscow in 1925 to make room for Roland Holst and Engels in the CPH. Engels would comment later that no one in Holland in the mid-1920s 'had any suspicion yet of the emergence of Stalinism'.¹⁰

Rather than blaming communism in general for the limitations and divergences in Roland Holst and Engels' sexual politics, it makes more sense to try to understand them by looking, to begin with, at their social and personal histories and situations. These (documented in Roland Holst's case by Elsbeth Ety's recent, full-scale biography¹¹ and in Engels' case by autobiographical writings and archives¹²) were very different. Roland Holst was a woman from the Dutch economic and cultural elite, able not only to live but also to contribute substantially to the left from her inherited wealth. In her long life she was married to one man, the artist Richard Roland Holst, from her own class and milieu. Richard played the role of a roving bourgeois husband in their marriage while Henriette remained resolutely faithful, as well as childless and apparently sexually starved.

Engels, if not exactly from a working class background, had in any event social origins and a home life somewhat closer to the CPH's norm. Brought up in poverty by his mother after his father's early death, he had joined the social democratic youth organization in 1913, aged 17, several years after his mother and stepfather joined the adult organization, and the Communist Party in 1919, aged 23. He had moved rapidly through a series of low-paid clerical jobs before becoming (quite briefly) a Communist Party fulltimer and then a fulltimer for a Communist-controlled syndicalist public employees' union. His first marriage had come under pressure when

⁷ Manfred Herzer, 'Communists, Social Democrats, and the homosexual movement in the Weimar republic', in Gert Hekma et al. eds., *Gay Men and the Sexual History of the Political Left*, Binghamton NY: Harrington Park Press, 1995, 206.

⁸ On e.g. Dutch social democracy see Gert Hekma, 'Homosexuality and the left in the Netherlands, 1890-1911', in *Gay Men and the Sexual History of the Political Left*; on the US Socialist Party, Jesse F. Battan, "'Socialism will cure all but a bad marriage": free love and the American labor movement, 1850-1910', in this volume; on the British Labour Party, Lesley Hall, "'No sex please, we are socialists": the British Labour Party closes its eyes and thinks of England', in this volume. On anarchism see Richard Cleminson, 'Male inverts and homosexuals: sex discourse in the anarchist *Revista Blanca*', in *Gay Men and the Sexual History of the Political Left*.

⁹ Roland Holst, 'Inleiding', in Engels, 10; cf. Engels, 61.

¹⁰ Jacques Engels, *Zestig jaar socialistische beweging*, Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1979, 39.

¹¹ Elsbeth Ety, *Liefde is heel het leven niet: Henriette Roland Holst, 1869-1952*, [Amsterdam]: Uitgeverij Balans, 1996. For Ety's account of Roland Holst and Engels' political trajectory in the mid-1920s see 431-37.

¹² Engels, *Zestig jaar socialistische beweging*; Archief J. Engels, IISH. Engels' *Voor een strijdend socialisme (Een korte schets van mijn leven)*, n.p., 1967, is simply an earlier, shorter edition of *Zestig jaar socialistische beweging*, 'only meant for a small circle of acquaintances' as he put it.

party leaders discovered that his father-in-law worked for the police, and the marriage would not last. Money and health problems would plague his family over the years. It is hard to imagine anything besides left-wing politics that could have brought two such dissimilar people together and even made them long-time friends.¹³

The different standpoints that Roland Holst and Engels arrived at on a number of sexual-political issues may well bear some relation to their different backgrounds. Without reducing these two radicals' opinions to products of their gender, class and generation, we can appreciate the ways in which their specific social circumstances and historical trajectories helped lead them to their varying views and win a working class and progressive audience for their views. Their works on sexual and ethical issues got a reasonably warm reception on the far left, in fact; not only from the CPH, which they were about to leave, but also from a fair range of syndicalist trade unionists, working class youth and pacifist groups and dissident socialists.¹⁴ Where Roland Holst and Engels differed from each other, each of them seems to have been defending positions that were sympathetically discussed in labour and far left milieux, which were themselves crosscut by gender, class and generational diversity. Three issues in particular can serve to illustrate Roland Holst and Engels' different standpoints: domestic labour and the sexual division of labour; monogamy, fidelity and promiscuity; and homosexuality.

Roland Holst and Engels were both active on the working class left at a time when the consignment of domestic labour to women was almost universally seen as inevitable under capitalism, and as possible to abolish only through socialization of household work under socialism. In this context, however, Engels distinguished himself in *The Communist and His Sexual Morality* by the vehemence with which he denounced contemporary feminists who were neglecting their children, homes and men. Roland Holst's emphasis in her book was much more on how oppressive domestic labour was to women and how urgent it was to relieve them of this burden. Roland Holst stressed how important fidelity, sexual abstinence and sublimation would be in the communist future. Engels stressed how oppressive and unnatural monogamy is and how much more sexual freedom and room for a wide range of relationships there would be under communism. On the issue of homosexuality, finally, Engels had a much more gender-polarized vision of homosexuality than Roland Holst did.

Above and beyond their differences, Roland Holst and Engels shared a certain number of assumptions that also seem to require explanation: that it was pointless to try to persuade men to share domestic tasks, for example, and that sex without emotional commitment should be condemned. Engels himself lived long enough to comment wryly on how much his opinions in *The Communist and His Sexual Morality* had been a product of its time. 'On rereading', he said, 'it was clear how many yawns would greet you now [in 1979] if you broadcast opinions that were considered very advanced in the 1920s.'¹⁵ In fact not all of Roland Holst and Engels' opinions in the 1920s are quite as old hat today as he implied in the 1970s. To the extent their opinions do seem dated now, though, it seems sensible to ask what features of mid-1920s Dutch society made opinions seem plausible or even radical that seem no more than moderate today. Another factor worth considering is the trends within the communist movement that Roland Holst and Engels belonged to.

This paper puts forward the following hypotheses. (1) The gender, generational and class differences between Roland Holst and Engels can help explain differences in their sexual politics that would otherwise be hard to account for. (2) The conditions in which working class people lived in Holland in the 1920s —the lack of labour-saving technology in the home, for example, and the still limited development of contraceptive technology — can help explain conservative-

¹³ Engels described them as friends in *Zestig jaar socialistische beweging*, 36, and Roland Holst in her introduction to his book.

¹⁴ Engels lists the reviews his book received in *Zestig jaar socialistische beweging*, 31-32. Thanks to Georges Ubbiali for raising the question at the Université de Bourgogne seminar in Dijon of these works' reception in working class circles.

¹⁵ Engels, *Zestig jaar socialistische beweging*, 31.

seeming aspects of their otherwise radical thinking. (3) A turn towards more conservative positions on sexuality in the USSR and in international communist and left-wing socialist currents in the mid-1920s — Alexandra Kollontai's increasing isolation in Russian communism, for example, and Stella Browne's alienation from British communism — may well have put some limits on their thinking as well. (4) Recent research on class differences in pre-Second World War homosexualities can help account for the contrast between Roland Holst and Engels' views on this subject.

Housework: women's calling?

Even among socialist feminists in the early twentieth century, as Sheila Rowbotham points out, few argued for changing the traditional sexual division of labour or breaking down sex roles in the family.¹⁶ Even a truly radical thinker like Alexandra Kollontai concluded regretfully before the Bolshevik revolution that 'all these petty household cares ... are at present unavoidable [for women] (given the existence of individual, scattered domestic economies)'.¹⁷ Roland Holst and Engels were very much of their time in their resignation at forms of women's oppression resulting from the sexual division of labour in the family under capitalism.

Engels' perspective went beyond resigned acceptance of the limitations of capitalism, however. His book *The Communist and His Sexual Morality* is full of a repeated, essentialist insistence on women's innate suitability for domestic work. 'Women must undoubtedly have the same rights as men', he wrote; 'to prescribe for her the same *essence*, the same inner life, is folly. The woman who does not become a mother misses her *calling*' — Roland Holst, who never had any children herself, was presumably relieved to read that this loss could be compensated 'by another calling'. Engels added in a footnote that even a childless marriage was better for a woman than no marriage at all, except for 'the best and most devoted socialists' — but this was no 'ideal situation', he stressed, not something that other women should emulate.¹⁸

Engels was all for women's waged work outside the home, just the same. A woman's 'area of activity is enlarged, her field of vision extended, her self-reliance and independence fostered' by getting a job, he wrote. But this would inevitably lead to a 'double, nay a triple task: she must not only be a worker but also a housekeeper and child rearer'. The old family was falling apart, a socialist alternative for it was not yet available, and an increase in human suffering was therefore inevitable. In these circumstances 'the contemporary family is the place above all others where it is most difficult to put equality between men and women into practice'. There was simply nothing to be done about it under capitalism. He specifically rejected the slogan, 'Down with the family'; under capitalism, he said, the workers' movement cannot do without 'socialist childrearing in the family'. The socialist woman, 'equal and comrade' of the socialist man, had to accept household work as one of her proletarian duties. Any other perspective could only alienate workers and their wives from socialism.¹⁹

The idea seems not to have occurred to Engels that men might do any domestic work even in the socialist future. He foresaw only that 'a tenth of the women could carry out all domestic activities better, more cheaply and with less trouble'. He also doubted that women would ever work as much in agriculture or industry as men, since motherhood would interfere with that.²⁰

Engels blamed the follies of feminism on 'the bourgeois women's movement', while

¹⁶ Rowbotham, 141.

¹⁷ Alexandra Kollontai, 'The social basis of the woman question' (1909), in *Selected Writings*, Alix Holt trans. & ed., London: Allison & Busby, 1977, 68.

¹⁸ Engels, 27-28, 36n. Engels' enthusiasm for motherhood as calling seems difficult to reconcile with his recognition that women under socialism would feel 'little vocation to spend the greatest and best part of her life pregnant' and his conclusion that women's emancipation would thus lead to lower population growth (95) — a strikingly modern-seeming perspective on women's reproductive freedom.

¹⁹ Engels, 35, 102, 80, 40-41, 78-79.

²⁰ Engels, 81; Engels (1926), 68.

conceding that some women ‘who call themselves socialists’ adopted such positions as well. He even accused feminists of wanting to be ‘dominatrices’, completely rejecting sex, seeking complete equality, ‘exaggerated irritability’ and ‘sickly self-pity’.²¹ His wild accusations probably made feminists of whatever current seem more radical than they were in reality. Rowbotham’s conclusion for example is that early-twentieth-century feminists in fact ‘fell into the conservatism of asserting a natural and distinct sphere or role’ and ‘did not challenge the total sexual division of labour between men and women’.²² This suggests that Engels’ attacks on housework-shirking feminists may have been less an engagement with actual arguments than expressions of frustration with women he knew, perhaps even his own or his friends’ wives or partners.

The life he led as an underpaid, insecure labour activist was probably very much the sort to fuel tensions of this kind; and some of his remarks sound less like theoretical discussion than prolongations of domestic quarrels. It seems revealing in this connection that he argued against obligatory cohabitation by husbands and wives, citing William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft’s living-apart-together relationship as a model. With ‘women’s increasing intellectual independence’, he said, cohabitation has ‘become a source of much conflict and friction’.²³ This sounds rather like personal experience speaking.

In Roland Holst’s *Communism and Morality*, by contrast, there is virtually no trace of the essentialism that leads Engels to consider women as inherently suited for domestic labour. Roland Holst describes bitterly how ‘working class members of a political organization that has written the social liberation of woman into its programme can treat their own wives as beings of a lower order, created in order to devote their physical and mental powers exclusively to house-keeping and childcare’.²⁴ Like Engels she foresaw that sexuality in the socialist future would be ‘ennobled and enriched by sympathy and agreement in the realms of feeling and thinking’. More emphatically than Engels, however, she stressed that this was made extremely difficult under capitalism ‘because the woman in the proletarian family ... remains chained to domestic work’.²⁵

She also appreciated more than Engels how much labour-saving devices were already freeing middle class women from the drudgery of housework.²⁶ She stressed the progress that women could make in escaping from housework even under capitalism (given ‘much consideration, patience and self-restraint’ on their husbands’ part) through ‘a constant effort to pull themselves out of the rut of daily existence, a conscious orientation towards the wider field of public and social life’. Anticipating Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (published over twenty years later), she insisted, ‘Woman, now a sexual being, must ... become a human being.’²⁷

What could account for Roland Holst and Engels’ different perspectives on women’s housework? Probably their different social and personal circumstances had something to do with this. Not only was Roland Holst as a woman more sensitive to the burden that domestic labour

²¹ Engels, 27, 102, 104, 105. He specifically quoted Havelock Ellis’ criticism of women who were becoming ‘second-hand men’ (102).

²² Sheila Rowbotham, *A New World for Women: Stella Browne— Socialist Feminist*, London: Pluto Press, 1977, 21. Even an exemplary socialist feminist like Stella Browne accepted that childrearing was women’s work (73-74). Browne did say however that ‘many women have no maternal feelings at all’ and ‘should never become mothers’ (104).

²³ Engels (1926), 190, 191n1.

²⁴ Henriette Roland Holst-van der Schalk, *Comm unisme en moral*, Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1925, 190.

²⁵ Roland Holst, 190. Her language, more than Engels’, is reminiscent of Leon Trotsky, whom Engels and she both openly admired and cited at a time when his name was rapidly becoming anathema in the communist movement (thanks partly to Roland Holst’s association with Trotsky going back to the Zimmerwald conference of antiwar socialists in 1915). Trotsky described woman in the traditional family as ‘a slave, if not a beast of burden’ (‘A letter to a Moscow women workers’ celebration and rally’ (1923), in *Women and the Family*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973, 29).

²⁶ Roland Holst, 190.

²⁷ Roland Holst, 196-97. At least in his writings on revolutionary Russia, here too Trotsky’s authority was on Roland Holst’s side. He argued that ‘state initiative’ in fostering socialization of housework and childcare could and should be supplemented by ‘combining the resources and efforts of individual families’. He also stressed the role of women’s self-organization: Who ‘is called upon first of all to struggle against the barbaric family situation if not the woman revolutionist?’, he asked (‘A letter’, 29-30).

put on women. Also as a wealthy woman for whom servants or followers took some part of this burden off her shoulders, she was perhaps better able than Engels to imagine how women might escape from it. Engels' experience would have been of frictions generated by women's resentment of their role in the household; only Roland Holst's experience contained building blocks of hope for change in the immediate future.

Engels' insistence that there was no way to lighten working class women's burden of domestic labour under capitalism seems all too understandable, and Roland Holst's insistence that some change *might* be possible seems remarkable, in light of the conditions with which most Dutch working class women contended in the mid-1920s. Vacuum cleaners were unheard-of luxuries in working class families at the time; even running hot water was exceptional. In these conditions housework meant hours of drudgery every day. With workdays of nine or ten hours or more far from exceptional, a working class woman might well despair at the idea of getting her husband to share the burden.

Compare that situation with today, when studies still show that widespread labour-saving devices, work weeks that are still significantly shorter than 80 years ago, and pressure from the feminist movement have only managed to extract a few additional hours of housework from men and shift the burden of housework by only a few percentage points from women to men. The most significant factor enabling a minority of employed women to escape housework to some extent may in fact be the falling cost and widening prevalence of female domestic servants in the last two or three decades — this was at least the opinion of a social democratic president of Belgium's National Women's Council, Mieke van Haegendoren.²⁸ Viewed in this light, Roland Holst's and Engels' different approaches to the problem three-quarters of a century ago, in far worse conditions, can be seen as variations on a common, fairly reasonable pessimism.

It also seems likely that Engels was made bolder in his condemnation of any attempt by women to escape housework, and that Roland Holst was made more resigned, by the change in the climate of opinion in the Soviet Union from the early 1920s on. In the first years of the revolution a truly radical thinker like Alexandra Kollontai, the first revolutionary commissar for social affairs, was far from isolated in concluding that mothers' specific responsibilities included giving birth, breastfeeding and nothing more — not even changing nappies, washing the baby or rocking the cradle. Men could share equally in children's education, she said, where this was their voluntary choice and 'this does not conflict with the interests of the collective'. Kollontai even went so far as to argue that 'the communist society can arrange for *men and women* whose job it is to go round in the morning cleaning rooms'.²⁹

In practice, however, even Russian male communists almost always expected women to do the cooking and cleaning; and in any event Kollontai's influence declined rapidly after her defeat in a factional battle over trade union issues in 1920-21. Most attempts to collectivize domestic labour were abandoned with the introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1921. Even in the working women's paper *Rabotnitsa* only one or two articles appeared in the whole of the 1920s arguing, in agreement with Kollontai and her ally Inessa Armand (by then dead), that men could and should take on domestic tasks.³⁰ Given the Russian communists' authority, and even more the power of the Soviet example, this was bound to dampen down the radicalism of communists outside the USSR. British socialist feminist Stella Browne's decision to leave the British Communist party in 1923 was apparently one expression of discontent with this process.³¹

²⁸ Ida Dequeecker, 'Belgium: As some women climb the career ladder, others are sent back to the kitchen', in Penny Duggan & Heather Dashner eds., *Women's Lives in the New Global Economy*, Amsterdam: IIRE, 1994, 15.

²⁹ Alexandra Kollontai, 'The labour of women in the evolution of the economy' (1923), in *Selected Writings*, Alix Holt trans. & ed., London: Allison & Busby, 1977, 144; 'Theses on communist morality in the sphere of marital relations' (1921), in *Selected Writings*, 227-28; 'Communism and the family' (1919), in *Selected Writings*, 255 [emphasis added].

³⁰ Alix Holt, 'Les bolcheviks et l'oppression des femmes', in Annik Mahaim et al. (eds.), *Femmes et mouvement ouvrier: Allemagne d'avant 1914, Révolution russe, Révolution espagnole*, Paris: La Brèche, 1979, 100, 98, 106-07. Trotsky's defeat in the 1923-24 faction fight diminished his authority on these issues as well.

³¹ See Sheila Rowbotham, *A New World for Women*, 29-30.

Sublimation, for or against

Both Roland Holst and Engels accepted the view predominant among Marxists in their time that, while institutionalized monogamy would disappear in communist society, long-term emotional and sexual partnerships between men and women would flourish all the more. But the two of them occupied virtually opposite extremes of this common ground. Roland Holst was at the extreme pro-restraint, pro-fidelity end of the spectrum. Engels was far more libertarian.

Calls for sexual restraint were common in the Dutch socialist circles that Roland Holst and Engels moved in. One 1927 article in *Klassenstrijd* (Class Struggle), a journal that both Roland Holst and Engels helped edit, saw sex education as largely serving to discourage ‘the young child [from making] movements and gestures that pleasurably stimulate its sexual feelings’, since these were known to be harmful ‘for its nervous system and its immune system’. ‘Discipline in sexual life is part of the picture of the “conscious worker”’, the article concluded.³²

Roland Holst took a similar standpoint in *Communism and Morality*. She opposed ‘every sickly overstimulation of sexual desire, the diseased quest for pleasure through change, the diseased surrender to every fleeting charm and every sensual impulse’.³³ The ‘Communist International ... cannot tolerate large quantities of psychic energy, which could benefit the struggle for socialism, being dispersed in enervating excesses’, she wrote.³⁴ Above all ‘in the current phase of its struggle, the working class needs leaders who excel in strict self-control and self-restraint.’³⁵ Blind ‘repression of sexual instincts’ would lead to ‘serious disturbances of psychic equilibrium’, she said, but a ‘conscious effort’ to ‘sublimate one’s “animal drives”’ was all to the good.³⁶

Engels disagreed. ‘This sublimation, this transference of unused sexual energy into labour power, is only possible *to a certain extent*,’ he wrote. ‘It cannot *entirely* root out or *absolutely* repress that desire, and it *must* not do so.’³⁷

Interestingly enough both Roland Holst and Engels drew on Freud’s work in order to justify their different attitudes towards sublimation, even though psychoanalysis was increasingly being rejected in the communist movement in favour of Pavlov’s behavioural school of psychology.³⁸ ‘Keeping one’s own urges ... under control (as opposed to repressing them) [is] the foundation of all culture’, Engels wrote, in what seems a clear reference to Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*.³⁹ His emphasis on the harmful effects of sublimation if carried too far seems closer to Freud’s own position than Roland Holst’s seemingly limitless enthusiasm for conscious restraint. In some ways Engels seems to anticipate Herbert Marcuse’s later critique of what he

³² A.M.Z., ‘Eenige opmerkingen over sexueele moraal’, *Klassenstrijd* v. 2 no. 3 (1927), 88-89. Similar opinions were voiced more often in the Soviet Union from 1922 or 1923 on, leaving Kollontai isolated in her sexual libertarianism (see Alix Holt’s comments in Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, 202). The workingwomen’s paper *Rabotnitsa* frequently preached sexual abstinence ‘in women’s interests’ in the 1920s, for example (Alix Holt, ‘Les bolcheviks et l’oppression des femmes’, in *Femmes et mouvement ouvrier*, 115-16).

³³ Roland Holst, 199.

³⁴ Henriette Roland Holst, *Communisme en moraal*, 198. Strangely enough Roland Holst’s biographer Elsbeth ETTY conflates Roland Holst and Engels’ standpoints, remarking here, ‘Comparable opinions were also expressed by Jacques Engels in his little book *De Communist en zijn sexueele moraal* (1926), which Roland Holst edited (ETTY, 440). ETTY even describes Engels as a ‘supporter of the Pure Life Movement, which forbade sexual intercourse not aimed at reproduction’ (ETTY, 691 n79). I have no idea what this description is based on.

³⁵ Roland Holst, 203.

³⁶ Roland Holst, 208.

³⁷ Engels, 27. Here Engels converged with what Wilhelm Reich would later write: ‘Some people believe that by excluding sex altogether they gain strength. That is a fallacy. The fact is that if your sex life is too restricted, then your *working intensity*, at least, is bound to suffer...’ (‘Politicizing the sexual problem of youth’ (1932), in *Sex-Pol: Essays, 1929-34*, Lee Baxandall ed., New York: Vintage Books, 1972, 262). Kollontai too thought that sexual restraint could be harmful (‘Theses on communist morality’, in *Selected Writings*, 229).

³⁸ Trotsky was exceptional in his continuing interest in and sympathy for Freud’s work: see Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921-29*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959, 178-80.

³⁹ Engels, 30. The 1926 edition contains far more explicit references to Freud, as well as to other authorities like Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter and August Bebel, than the 1931 edition.

would call ‘surplus repression’: even if Freud is right that abstinence strengthens character, Engels wrote, ‘contemporary social relations demand *too* much self-control’.⁴⁰ Nonetheless Roland Holst and Engels both use terminology that reflects what has been called Freud’s ‘hydraulic model’: the conception that human beings have a fixed quantity of energy at their disposal that can either be spent on sex or transferred to some other purpose.

Fidelity or diversity?

Even among those socialists who championed sexual freedom rather than sexual restraint, there was almost no one who defended the idea of sex with anonymous or even multiple partners. Even a thinker as radical as Kollontai, again, doubted that anyone under capitalism could withstand ‘the jealousy that eats into even the best human souls’ or the ‘deeply-rooted sense of property that demands the possession not only of the body but also of the soul of another’.⁴¹

‘Fidelity and constancy in love’ are ‘the working class’s ideal in the sexual realm’, wrote Roland Holst.⁴² She conceded the analysis that Jacques Engels would borrow from Friedrich Engels that monogamy among the bourgeoisie has everything to do with inheritance. But she denied that monogamy among workers had anything to do with it.⁴³

Engels’ book took over virtually none of Roland Holst’s praise of fidelity. Only one thing is certain, he wrote: ‘that an indissoluble marriage between one man and one woman for their entire lifetimes is, of all forms of sexual relationship, the one that corresponds least to our “natural inclination”’. He even credited exogamy with making humans ‘the most highly developed animal’. ‘Next to unlimited power and unlimited property, nothing is so calculated to threaten the happiness of the community as unrestricted sexual intercourse’, he wrote; but ‘real life teaches us that love, like comradeship, seeks to radiate in many different directions’. ‘Our diversity in character and inclination and in our circumstances is too great to make rules that would apply always to everyone.’ In the socialist future monogamy — particularly its ‘permanence imposed by law and public opinion, its dependence on economic and other unworthy considerations’ — would ‘completely disappear’. Instead there would be a ‘rich diversity, following from personal nature and inclination’. Instead of marrying, people would ‘recognize that partnerships arise and grow, just as friendship, enmity and all other human feelings do’.⁴⁴

Particularly noteworthy are Engels’ reflections on young people’s sexuality, presumably reflective of his own relative youth (he was 28 or 29 when he wrote his book) and his own experience in youth movements. He shows a lack of concern about protecting young people from

⁴⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, New York: Vintage Books, 1955; Engels (1926), 123.

⁴¹ Kollontai, ‘The social basis of the woman question’, *Selected Writings*, 69. Even after the revolution Kollontai was not an advocate of sex dissociated from emotional or social ties, though Bolshevik critics seized on her phrase about sex that would be as natural as ‘drinking a glass of water’ to accuse her of holding such a position. She was willing to accept both long-term, exclusive relationships or ‘frequent change of partners’, but rejected sex ‘based on physical attraction alone and ... not attended by love or fleeting passion’ or ‘built not on physical attraction but on calculation, habit or even intellectual affinity’ (‘Theses on communist morality’, in *Selected Writings*, 229-30). ‘Essentially love is a profoundly social emotion’, she argued, to which ‘exclusiveness and “all-embracing love”’ is alien (‘Make way for winged Eros: a letter to working youth’ (1923), in *Selected Writings*, 278, 288).

⁴² Roland Holst, 199.

⁴³ Roland Holst, 200. See Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, in e.g. Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume*, New York: International Publishers, 1968, 497, 507.

⁴⁴ Engels, 53-56, 63, 65, 66, 72. Here it was Engels who was closer to Trotsky’s position. Although he described a ‘long and permanent marriage’ as the ‘ideal standard’, Trotsky wrote, ‘If one understands by “family” ideal monogamy — not in the legal but in the actual sense — then the Bolsheviks could not destroy what never was nor is on earth, barring fortunate exceptions’ (‘Family relations under the Soviets’ (1933), in *Women and the Family*, 53). Stella Browne too, after singing the praises of ‘the great love’, stated flatly, ‘Most natures are not capable of it.’ (Rowbotham, *A New World for Women*, 95)

Engels’ description of humans as ‘the most highly developed animal’ points to another interesting difference between him and Roland Holst: like many socialists of his time he was enthusiastic about eugenics, whereas she was dubious at best. An emphasis on improving humans as a physical species, she wrote, ‘could mean a contempt for humans as creators of intellectual and artistic values that is incompatible with our conception of socialism’ (Roland Holst, 205, 207).

sexual dangers that is not that common even today. ‘Disappointments and mistakes are unavoidable, so it’s best that young people have the freedom to experience them early’, he wrote. ‘The youth movement and the “free association” that predominates there has brought about this freedom.... What young people need is ... more confidence in the happy, healthy energy of their lives.’⁴⁵

One aspect that characterizes both Roland Holst’s and Engels’ writings on sexuality is their unashamed emotionalism, in any event compared to sex radical writings of the 1970s and later. Engels struck a revealing note early on in his book: ‘Even more people live in absolute deprivation of love than in absolute deprivation of bread.’ ‘A healthy sex life must go together with an intellectual-ethical, comradely understanding’, he concluded; ‘but on the other hand such a relationship can generally arise only on the basis of mutual sexual attraction.’⁴⁶ In their own minds people in the 1920s were living through a *Neue Sachlichkeit*, a ‘new matter-of-factness’, even a new cynicism, in reaction against what they saw as the sentimentality of pre-World War I generations. But to our ears they sound more than sentimental enough. It is perhaps worth considering whether the manipulation of sentiment under consumer capitalism tends to make emotionality more and more suspect, and whether this may have contributed to a certain progressive disassociation of sex from emotion in sexual radicalism over the course of the twentieth century.

Interestingly, Roland Holst and Engels took somewhat different standpoints about truthfulness about extramarital sex. Both were for truthfulness and openness in principle — ‘No one has the right to a relationship with third parties without knowledge of his or her spouse’, wrote Engels⁴⁷ — but Roland Holst was willing to make exceptions in practice. ‘Fellow feeling ... sometimes rules out truthfulness’, she wrote.⁴⁸

How can we account for the differences in Roland Holst and Engels’ positions on issues of sexual restraint and fidelity? Again, it seems useful to look towards differences in their personal experiences, and particularly the class, generational and gender factors that shaped their experiences. Roland Holst, who according to her biographer had neither a sex life with her husband nor a sex life with anybody else, could undoubtedly conceive more easily of complete sexual abstinence than Engels could, since it was not part of his adult experience. Going beyond the merely personal level, that experience would probably not have seemed as bizarre to other middle class women of her generation — after all, her adolescence and young womanhood fell in the period that over the Channel was called Victorian⁴⁹ — as it probably would have to someone of Engels’ gender, class and generation.

Dennis Bos’ work on socialist sexual politics in the 1880s and ‘90s suggests that extensive and multiple sexual relationships were a commonplace of Dutch working class lives at the time, not just a figment of sex radicals’ fantasies.⁵⁰ Between the 1890s and the 1920s, however, the social democratic party, trade unions and other organizations making up the social democratic movement — which constituted one of the virtually self-contained ‘pillars’ of the Netherlands’ very ‘pillarized’ society in this period — were hard at work at a so-called ‘civilizing offensive’, aimed at changing Dutch working class culture in general and family and sexual life in particular. The Amsterdam School housing pioneered by Dutch social democracy in its early municipal bulwark, for example, was designed consciously to cleanse whole neighbourhoods of public squares, cafés and pool halls where working class men and women would mingle promiscuously,

⁴⁵ Engels, 47, 49.

⁴⁶ Engels, 14, 60.

⁴⁷ Engels, 65.

⁴⁸ Roland Holst, 201.

⁴⁹ This is not meant to endorse any rigid schema of a repressive nineteenth century and a liberated twentieth century, which Thomas Bouchet rightly criticized in introducing the Université de Bourgogne seminar. As I suggested above, the decades from the mid-1920s on were probably a period of increasingly sexual conservatism in many countries.

⁵⁰ Bos, ‘The making of a new sexual morality’, cited above.

so as to draw the worker into the safety and respectability of the living room where he would 'come to rest in his family'.⁵¹ It would be interesting to find out more about the extent to which this 'offensive' actually succeeded in 'civilizing' working class milieux like the one Engels moved in.

One change had clearly occurred by the 1920s: if there were socialist sexual radicals in the 1890s who were willing to defend prostitution, as Bos shows, there was no room left for such attitudes in the Dutch communist movement of the mid-1920s. On the other hand, the openness to relationships and even children out of wedlock that Bos describes may have been more enduring in the circles that someone like Engels moved in. That could help explain Engels' lack of commitment to sexual restraint or fidelity. Roland Holst's world as described by her biographer, by contrast, though considered artistic, bohemian and advanced by Dutch middle class standards, did not have room for relationships or children out of wedlock.

On the issue of fidelity, it is interesting to compare Roland Holst's views with those of her friend Rosa Luxemburg, who managed to sustain a middle class lifestyle in keeping with her own family background for years at a stretch, even while devoting herself to the socialist movement. Luxemburg demanded fidelity of her first partner Leo Jogiches — for years her closest political and intellectual co-worker — in a way Roland Holst never did with her husband. Luxemburg had left her own family and country (Poland), however, first to study in Switzerland and then to be politically active in Germany. While some of her ideals about relationships, her yearnings for a child and a family life, may reflect conventional middle class attitudes of her time, she was much less enmeshed in a middle class social network than Roland Holst (whom she called 'the blonde Madonna'). Luxemburg, for example, though she referred to Jogiches as her husband, never married or apparently even considered marrying any of her partners, though friends seemed to have hoped she would marry her young lover Hans Diefenbach. (The sham marriage that enabled her to remain legally in Germany was formally ended after five years and was a source of amusement to her.)⁵²

There was a still greater contrast between Roland Holst's life and that of a radical like Alexandra Kollontai, thrown despite her own middle class origins much more into an unstable existence of clandestine organizing, exile and civil war and living a very different kind of personal life from Roland Holst. Luxemburg largely detached herself from a Polish middle class milieu that still existed; Kollontai helped make a revolution that wiped the middle class milieu she grew up in off the face of the earth. So it is not so surprising that Kollontai was exceptionally drastic in casting off the conventional sexual morality of her time. In fact she adopted views on fidelity somewhat closer to Engels' — though ironically Engels joined in the general Soviet distortion of Kollontai's position.⁵³

It is worth mentioning that none of these radical women depicted women as naturally more passive or submissive in sexual matters than men, a point of view that was quite common in their day and is still quite common today.⁵⁴ For that matter neither did Engels.

We definitely need to recognize one factor that was bound to weigh against acceptance of multiple sexual relationships in the mid-1920s: the limits of the existing contraceptive technology. Engels, despite his libertarianism *and* his advocacy of limiting population, expresses

⁵¹ Richter Roegholt, *Amsterdam in de 20de eeuw*, Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1976, v. 1, 25, 31-32.

⁵² J.P. Netti, *Rosa Luxemburg* (2 vols.), 24-27, 378-80, 674, 109-10; Elzbieta Ettinger, *Rosa Luxemburg: Une vie*, Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1990 (trans. by Dominique Peters of *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 13, 77. Ettinger (179-80) concludes that Luxemburg broke off her relationship with Jogiches after beginning one with Kostia Zetkin, while Netti attributes the break-up to her rage at Jogiches' brief affair with another woman. See also *Comrade and Lover: Rosa Luxemburg's Letters to Leo Jogiches*, ed. and trans. by Ettinger, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1979.

⁵³ Engels wrote that she did not consider purely physical relations any less worthy than others (1926, 121). In fact his position, that 'wingless eros' is acceptable in itself but not as worthy as 'winged eros', was very similar to hers.

⁵⁴ Anita Grossman ('The New Woman and the rationalization of sexuality in Weimar Germany', in Ann Snitow et al. eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 159) argues that this was the dominant view of women's sexuality among German sex reformers in the 1920s.

distaste for all existing methods of birth control. He goes back and forth between counting on future technological progress and advocating coitus interruptus as an alternative method of birth control. In the midst of his arguments for sexual freedom, he cannot avoid acknowledging unwanted or abandoned children as the most tragic consequence of break-ups.⁵⁵ Curiously, neither he nor Roland Holst make any reference to the greatest advance in contraceptive technology in their time, made in Holland only a couple of years before their books appeared: Dr. Rutgers' 'Dutch cap' or pessary. This may be an interesting instance of the time lag between technological innovation and social recognition.

Homosexuals as inverts?

Engels' view of homosexuality, finally, was very much in keeping with the 'scientific' understanding of a contemporary figure like Magnus Hirschfeld. Homosexuality is 'not in the first place a moral deviation ... but a form of illness, which about 2 percent of the population suffers from', he wrote. 'Male homosexuals have feminine habits and inclinations, including in non-sexual questions.... Their sexual desires are oriented towards normal men, whose "wives" they want to be.' He treated homosexuality like other 'deviant forms that contemporary society brands as immoral'; 'the elimination of the need to hide sexual relations of an unusual character is one of the first preconditions for a healthy sex life and a healthy sexual morality'.⁵⁶

Seeing homosexuals as congenital representatives of an intermediate sex, Engels ended up making a backhanded and unusual case for a sort of same-sex marriage. 'Society can consider itself lucky when homosexuals have sexual relationships with each other, *thus preventing their having children with the same illness,*' he reasoned with typically eugenic logic. 'The worst crime a homosexual can commit ... (is) marrying... a woman.' So, he concluded, they should just be allowed to settle down with men in permanent relationships, which is their heart's desire anyway. He did add though that homosexuals with 'great gifts of mind and heart' and the 'mental strength great enough to repress their sexual desires ... hereby have great energy at their disposal and are often able to meet higher demands than many others'. Why complete sexual abstinence should be harmful for heterosexuals but exalting for homosexuals, he didn't say.⁵⁷

Roland Holst did not deal with homosexuality in her 1925 book. But her biographer talks about a number of supportive personal friendships she had with gays and lesbians, who did not necessarily fit the mould that Engels would have put them in. Roland Holst wrote of the openly lesbian sculptor Saar de Sweet and her lover Emilie van Kerkhof for example, who lived near the Roland Holsts for years in Laren, 'One cannot imagine any better neighbours than these two women.'⁵⁸

Roland Holst and Engels' apparently different notions on homosexuality may be illuminated by George Chauncey's study of pre-1940 homosexualities in New York. Chauncey concludes that gender and sexual roles were more polarized for longer historical periods in working and lower class milieux than in middle class milieux.⁵⁹ This could help explain why groups with working class bases might have tended before the Second World War to put forward 'third sex'-

⁵⁵ Engels, 76.

⁵⁶ Engels (1926), 96-97, 168. The entire section on homosexuality was omitted from the abridged, 1931 edition. Stella Browne too seemed to accept that 'the invert, man or woman, is drawn towards the normal types of their own sex.' (Rowbotham, *A New World for Women*, 102) Hirschfeld's theory was in turn indebted to Karl Heinrich Ulrichs' theory of 'Urnings'.

⁵⁷ Engels (1926), 97-98. Engels' position corresponded in most ways to the standard Soviet analysis that while homosexuality is 'unnatural' and 'most [homosexuals] suffer', the aim of social policy should be to make 'the everyday interactions of homosexuals ... as normal as possible' (M. Sereinski, 'Homosexuality', Laura Engelstein trans., from the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (1930), vol. 17, in Mark Blasius & Shane Phelan eds., *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, New York: Routledge, 1977, 214-15).

⁵⁸ Etty, 158-59.

⁵⁹ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, New York: Basic Books, 1994, 100, 106-07, 119, 126-27.

type theories of homosexuality, while groups that rejected any association between homosexuality and gender nonconformity, like the German Community of the Special, might have tended to lean more towards the political right. If there is anything to this hypothesis, it could help explain why a more plebeian CPH member like Engels put forward such a gender-polarized view of homosexuality, and why such a view would ring less true for an elite figure like Roland Holst.

To the extent that Roland Holst and Engels did see homosexuality differently, they did so within a certain common framework. Nothing in either of their work suggests that homosexual desires or relationships were of equal value to heterosexual ones. But then such a position was virtually unknown in their time, even in the work of an openly gay sexual radical like Edward Carpenter or a woman like Stella Brown who denied any 'wish to slight or depreciate the love life of the real homosexual'.⁶⁰ In this context Engels' curious argument for same-sex relationships seems remarkable.

None of the hypotheses that this paper has put forward — the role of gender, generational and class differences in explaining differences in sexual politics; the role of restricted labour-saving and contraceptive technology in holding back sexual radicalism; the role of increasing sexual conservatism in the USSR in a general, growing defensiveness among sexual radicals in the 1920s; and the role of class differences in shaping the pre-Second World War politics of homosexuality — can be considered as proven. All the correlations proposed in this paper need to be tested further through extensive social historical investigation. But the evidence of Roland Holst and Engels' works suggests that there may be something to them. They seem at least to be promising starting points for further and broader research.

⁶⁰ Rowbotham, *A New World for Women*, 72-73; Stella Browne, *The Sexual Variety and Variability among Women and Their Bearing upon Social Reconstruction*, London: British Society of Sex Psychology, 1917, 6.